

ROUGH MUSIC AND FOLKLORIC ELEMENTS IN THE WHITEBOY MOVEMENTS

THE Whiteboy¹ movement, which began in County Tipperary in 1761, articulated for the first time in a sustained, organized system of protest the growing dissatisfaction of the laboring poor with the state of land tenancy and ownership. This paper will address the questions: Why did the Whiteboy disturbances of the eighteenth century take the particular form they did? From what cultural roots did they germinate and grow?

Writing about the Rebecca Riots of south-west Wales in the 1830s and 1840s, David Williams stated that "it can, indeed, be said with complete certainty that the Rebecca Riots were an extension of the practice of the *ceffyl pren*."² This practice, which will be discussed in the body of the paper, was a form of local justice administered by members of a community in response to an offense against a set of accepted mores or norms. *Ceffyl pren* was a localized, Welsh name for the kind of public censure that falls under the umbrella term "rough music," which was resorted to throughout England, parts of Scotland, and Wales in various forms until as late as the twentieth century. My investigations of the Whiteboy movement begin with the question: Was there a comparable Irish practice of communal, ritualized, punitive activity of which the Whiteboys were an extension?

The simple answer, if we search for an exact, named analogue, is no. There are, however, several correspondences between the features of *ceffyl pren*/rough music and the characteristics of the Whiteboy movement, and these will constitute one part of the following discussion. Further, I hope to suggest tentatively that a traditional form of local humiliation may have existed in Ireland that left its mark on the Whiteboys. In addition,

1 Unless one group is specifically stated, I follow G. C. Lewis in my use of this term: "We use the term Whiteboy, in a general sense, to include all those disturbances and outrages which have been carried on not only by the Whiteboys, but also by the Rightboys, the Threshers, the Whitefeet, and Blackfeet, the Terry Alts, Captain Rock's men, &c., as it is the best known expression . . ." from *On Local Disturbances in Ireland* (London, 1836), 98.

2 Quoted in Trefor Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs* (Llandysul, 1987), 169.

there were a number of factors in Irish culture and folklore that contributed their particular flavor to the uprisings. A. W. Smith comments:

Whenever a community large or small feels itself threatened it is likely to brandish its characteristic traditions and to assert its peculiar identity. Social struggle then is likely to expose to view really deeply felt traditions.³

The late eighteenth century qualifies as a time of crisis for the Irish peasantry, and the "deeply felt traditions" which underpinned its response to that crisis will be dealt with in the third part of the paper. Before we examine the correspondences between the Whiteboys and rough music, a brief summary of the key facts concerning the Whiteboys will be useful.

The Whiteboy Movement

During the middle of the eighteenth century, rapid population growth increased the competition for the small tracts of land upon which the cottier and small farmer depended for their subsistence crop of potatoes.⁴ At the same time an upswing in the economy, which primarily benefited the strong farmers and landlords, increased the chasm between rich and poor.⁵ The suspension of the Cattle Acts, which had formerly kept Irish cattle, beef and butter out of the British market, led to an increase of grazing land at the expense of tillage. Landowners and middlemen evicted small tenants from their holdings in order to convert their plots into pasturage, and graziers erected enclosures around land that had for years been regarded as commonage.⁶ In this crowded and resentful milieu we see the formation of rural "combinations" of local men who committed:

3 A. W. Smith, "Some Folklore Elements in Movements of Social Protest," *Folklore* vol. 77 (1967), 251.

4 L. M. Cullen, *An Economic History of Ireland Since 1660* (London, 1972), 118. Cullen states that the population of Ireland between 1735 and 1785 grew by a full million, an increase of 33%, making it four million in 1785.

5 James S. Donnelly, Jr., "The Whiteboy Movement, 1761-65," *Irish Historical Studies* xxi, (March 1978), 30.

6 Michael Beames, *Peasants and Power: The Whiteboy Movements and Their Control in Pre-Famine Ireland* (Sussex; New York, 1983), 27.

... outbreaks of agrarian terrorism that repeatedly swept parts of Ireland between 1760 and 1845, primarily aimed at redressing the economic grievances of the poor. . . .⁷

The original Whiteboys, so-called because of the white shirts they wore over their clothing,⁸ became active in October of 1761 in County Tipperary in response to the enclosure of common land. Their wrath was vented mainly on property, not on persons, and they are said to have "gone about the country in large bodies, throwing down fences, rooting up orchards, cutting down trees, destroying bullocks and doing various injuries to property."⁹ All of these acts can be interpreted as stemming directly from the decrease of available land for farming and the corresponding increase in enclosed land, pasturage and pleasure-parks built by the gentry. In fact, it was bitter hostility about "land-grabbing" that formed the basis for a substantial part of the Whiteboy grievances in the southern counties. The other principle complaint was the payment of tithe to the established church.

The influence of the first "combination" radiated outward to other counties, where men assembled to redress their own particular local grievances. From the start of the movement in 1761 until it tapered off in the early decades of the nineteenth century, a series of locally adapted names and various causes of discontent framed these activities. George Cornewall Lewis, writing in 1836 with what must be deemed a great deal of sympathy for the plight of the Irish poor, identified about eight separate movements, but in truth, the number must have been far greater than that. In addition to the Whiteboys, a name applied mainly to the first agrarian uprisings in the south and also to a later group that revived it between 1775 and 1785,¹⁰ there were Levellers, Rightboys, Whitefeet, Blackfeet, Terry Alts, Oakboys, Steelboys, Thrashers, Ribbonmen, Cap-

7 Paul E. W. Roberts, "Caravats and Shanavests: Whiteboyism and Faction Fighting in East Munster 1802-11" in *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest 1780-1914*, eds. Samuel Clark & James S. Donnelly, Jr. (Madison, 1983), 66.

8 Donnelly, *IHS*, 20. This is the reason given by a contemporary observer from Youghal, but other possibilities will be discussed.

9 Lewis, 9-10.

10 Lewis, 19.

tain Rock's Men, Caravats, Shanavests, Lady Clares, Riskavellas, Blackhens and others.¹¹ Their grievances were equally varied and specific, emphasizing the very local nature of the movement. These ranged from anger at the enclosure of common land, at enforced labor on the roads in the north (many of which would benefit individuals more than communities), and at the rates charged by Catholic clergy for performance of the Sacraments, to objections to high rents and low wages for laborers, evictions, the price of land, and renewal fines, as well as, to a limited extent, private quarrels and feuds. As economic historian L. M. Cullen writes, "A demand for tenant-right by name does not occur in the agrarian grievances at all."¹² It will be clear from the above list that the Whiteboys were most concerned with the subsistence of their families, rather than with comfort or even security. They did not seek to overturn the entire system of Irish government that, as Lewis bluntly states, was "adopted to further the Protestant and English interest."¹³ This will become clearer when we determine who the participants of this movement were, and who were the objects of their resentment and rage.

The social structure of rural Ireland was composed of classes so finely graded that they often appear to be only a hair's breadth apart in terms of poverty and wealth. For instance, within the landlord class, it is possible to distinguish a spectrum of wealth and religion; both Catholic and Protestant figure here, as well as the middlemen who bought up large tracts of land for reselling at a profit, absentee landlords and the *nouveau riche*. Further down the social scale, strong farmers and graziers who rented their lands made up a middle class who often lived in "very comfortable and independent circumstances" and were, according to one contemporary observer, "the only cultivators who correspond to the real farmers of England. . . ."¹⁴ The peasants, who were the most numerous

11 Lewis, 107. Although their involvement with land and its tenure links them with the Whiteboy movement, I have deliberately omitted the Peep O'Day Boys, Orangemen and Defenders from the list: in my view they spring from a more politicized, sectarian impulse than the other groups listed.

12 Cullen, 83.

13 Lewis, 3.

14 Quoted in Beames, 14.

members of the populace, were often portrayed as jacks-of-all-trades—forced into a kind of economic ingenuity by their poverty:

They were the payers of rent to the landlord class and providers of labor for the farmers, but this is not the limit of their relationship with the world around them: 'the number and variety of dealings of this class is quite extraordinary, as they frequently take conacre, oat soil, and meadows, perhaps miles away from their farm, besides dealings for cattle to stock their land.'¹⁵

The peasants can be subdivided into five categories, according to how much land they owned. A rich peasant owned over thirty acres; a middle-rich peasant owned fifteen-to-thirty acres; five-to-fifteen acres constituted a livable holding; and the last two categories of one-to-five acres and less than one acre belonged to the poorest of the peasantry, who eked out a living from their work as laborers and the little amount of food they could grow on their small plots. Theirs was an extremely tenuous existence, and the failure to find work or a stint of bad weather would almost inevitably spell disaster for them.¹⁶ It was this class of peasant, the cottiers and smallest farmers, who were the principle activists in the Whiteboy movement.¹⁷ The movement itself has been referred to as "a vast trades' union for the protection of the Irish peasantry. . . ."¹⁸

It follows, then, that the victims of the Whiteboy uprisings were those people who were most directly responsible for the pressure bearing upon cottiers and laborers; the strong farmers of the middle class whose herds grazed on land which might have supported many families, and who were sometimes responsible for enclosing commonage.¹⁹ Representatives of the established church who were involved with the collection of the tithe of potatoes were particularly despised: it has been proven that the average cash wages for a day's labor, 4d., were scarcely sufficient to pay a peasant's conacre rent,²⁰ let alone the added burden of 5 shillings for the tithe of potatoes.²¹

¹⁵ Beames, 15.

¹⁶ Beames, 15-6.

¹⁷ Donnelly, *IHS*, 37.

¹⁸ Lewis, 99.

¹⁹ Roberts, 66; Donnelly, *IHS*, 44.

Along this line, it must be understood that the sectarian element one might expect to be present in this movement was absent (at least in its earliest days). The fact that most of the laboring poor were Catholic and the majority of the landed rich were Protestant should not be misconstrued as evidence of a Catholic rebellion or anti-government demonstration. Catholic farmers who offended Whiteboy codes were targeted for vengeance in the same manner as Protestant farmers, and Catholic clergy who demanded overly high fees for their services were the subjects of hostility in the same way as tithe collectors for the established church.²² Richard Aston, an English chief justice of the Court of Common Pleas, concluded after presiding over the trials of numerous Levellers that there was not "the least reason to impute those disturbances to disaffection to his majesty, his government, or the laws in general."²³

While we have seen that the names and grievances of Whiteboys varied according to the particular circumstances of a region, the methods employed in the uprisings were fairly consistent. In the first place, a body of men was assembled and sworn to secrecy and fidelity by illegal oaths which employed "persuasion and intimidation."²⁴ These oaths almost always contained a solemn declaration of loyalty and the intent to be ready for duty at a moment's notice:

20 Conacre was a small holding upon which a cottier, laborer or small farmer cultivated the food for his family. It "ensured a supply of food throughout the year for landless laborers, always assuming the crop did not fail. . . ." Beames, 6-7.

21 Donnelly, *IHS*, 37.

22 Lewis, 123-145. Lewis uses his interviews with several Irish gentleman and Protestant ministers to demonstrate

that the uprisings are connected with religion in only the most tangential manner. Further, he goes on to assert that, "... those parts of Ireland in which religious animosities are (on account of the even balancing of the two parties) the most frequent, have ever been nearly free from Whiteboy combinations; while those districts which are the head-quarters of Whiteboyism, have been more free than any other part of Ireland from religious dissension; inasmuch as nearly the whole population of them is Catholic." 125.

23 Donnelly, *IHS*, 46.

24 Beames, 71.

I swear that I will be ready at an hour's warning, if possible, by being properly summoned by any of the officers, serjeants, and corporals belonging to my company . . . Lastly I swear that I will not drink of any liquor whatsoever whilst on duty, without the consent of any one or other of the officers, serjeants, or corporals; and that we will be loyal one to another as in our power lies.²⁵

Rarely were these oaths compounded with political objectives. However, in the later days of the movement there was some mixture of sectarian and political influences, but these seem to have derived from the influence of the more purely sectarian Orangemen and Defenders.²⁶

After swearing in a number of men, the next strategic step was to procure fire-arms and weapons. According to the penal acts, it was illegal for Catholics to own fire-arms, and so it became necessary to enact a series of raids against Protestant land-owners who most likely owned a weapon. In fact, when landlords or gentry were attacked, it was almost inevitably with the aim of procuring weapons or else of injuring their property and not their persons.²⁷ Whiteboys forcibly entered houses and demanded weapons, and their forbearance to loot and rob during this great opportunity speaks to their single-mindedness of purpose:

The Whiteboys, even when masters of the country, seem always to preserve a certain degree of self-restraint, and the excesses unconnected with their object into which they may degenerate are rather the work of scattered individuals, than the result of a general and wide-spread license.²⁸

Suitably armed and sworn to fidelity, a Whiteboy party could undertake its serious work: effecting changes of land tenure, wages, priest dues, and other complaints in the community. Their two most frequently employed tools were intimidation and violence. In many cases, the intended victim would be alerted to his danger by a threatening notice posted somewhere on his property. Some of the more cautious or

25 Donnelly, *IHS*, 27.

26 Lewis, 165. For instance, "Never spare, but persevere and wade knee-deep in Orange blood."

27 Lewis, 243.

28 Lewis, 249-250.

merciful Whiteboys posted a series of notices which warned the recipient with increasing severity:

. . . If you do not do what I want before three days after receiving this, I will give you another change of your life, by giving you a 3rd notice and if you despise these warnings you may look out, as you will be assassinated when you least expect it. Underneath is the form of your coffin.²⁹

Less frequently, the process of posting notices was dispensed with altogether, and the Whiteboys proceeded directly to the threatened violence.³⁰

The violence perpetrated by the Whiteboys can be divided into two categories: violence against things and violence against people. Into the first category fall the breaking down of fences, gates and hedges undertaken by the Levellers in Munster in the 1760s; the burning of houses belonging to new tenants who were suspected of taking land "over the head" of an older tenant; the overturning of sods in a field to render it unfit for grazing; and the destruction of deer parks and orchards that were seen as suitable for tillage.³¹ All of these actions can be understood as the result of frustration over the unequal distribution and misuse of land. Offenses against people ranged from simply frightening a victim by abducting him from his dwelling and transporting him to a distant location, burying him up to his neck in a hole filled with briars and hurling insults and abuse at him, to more severe beatings, maiming, rape and murder. This last punishment was the "ultimate sanction employed by the Whiteboys and they used it selectively against their most stubborn and dangerous enemies."³²

The Whiteboys carried out these punishments with the assurance that they were working on behalf of a code of law. At odds with a legal system that in no way could be seen as protecting their rights or persons, the Whiteboys enforced a legal code that served their own purposes. Sometimes their laws were posted in a public place for the general populace to acquaint themselves with, but in other cases, it was expected

29 Beames, 75.

30 Lewis, 223.

31 Donnelly, *IHS*, 33.

32 Beames, 81.

that the laws would be generally known and obeyed without exception. One notice, which was posted at the gates of churches and chapels by the Rightboys, instructed the public about its obligations and rights regarding the clergy of both Protestant and Catholic faiths:

You are hereby cautioned not to pay Minister's tithes, only in the following manner, viz. potatoes, 4s per acre, oats and meadows, 1s per acre—Roman Catholic clergy to receive for marriages, 5s, for baptism, 1s 6d, for anointing and visitation of the sick, 1s, for mass, 1s, for confession, 6d; you are hereby warned not to pay Clerk money, nor any dues concerning marriages; be all sure not to go any expense at your confessing turns, but let them partake of your own fare.³³

It will be noticed that the threat here is general; any person who, being acquainted with these instructions, should disobey them risked arousing the ire and incurring the punishment of the Whiteboys. A letter between two Irish gentlemen demonstrates the pervasive and thorough nature of Whiteboy law, calling it:

A complete system of legislation, with the most prompt, vigorous, and severe executive power, sworn, equipped, and armed for all purposes of savage punishment . . . the combination established surpasses the law in vigor, promptitude, and efficacy, and that it is more safe to violate the law than to obey it.³⁴

Faced with a government which considered them beyond the pale of law and justice, the Whiteboys enacted this separate system of law so that they might have some chance at survival.

Rough Music and the Whiteboys

"Rough music" is a term used generally throughout England, parts of Scotland, and Wales since the end of the seventeenth century to indicate a "rude cacophony, with or without more elaborate ritual, which usually directed mockery or hostility against individuals who offended against

33 Beames, 29.

34 Lewis, 100. The law referred to in this passage is the established English, Protestant law.

certain community norms."³⁵ Ridicule and shame were the essence of rough music, and the society which visited one form of it or another upon one of its members intended the public disgrace to leave a lasting impression both on the individual and on the larger community. This was precisely the intent behind many of the Whiteboy crimes. In this sense, both rough music and Whiteboyism were punitive and exemplary, re-establishing order and values through a deliberate inversion of "proper" behavior on the part of participants whose tools were obscenity, transvestitism, blasphemy and violence.

E. P. Thompson, one of the foremost historians of rough music, notes that its forms were so various as to almost defy categorization. Nevertheless, he specifies four main categories with the caveat that:

. . . these may overlap and borrow features from each other. These groups are: a) the *ceffyl pren* (Welsh for 'wooden horse') associated with the Rebecca Riots in several parts of Wales; b) 'riding the stang,' widely distributed in the Scottish Lowlands and northern England; c) 'skimmington' or 'skimmety' riding, entrenched still, in the West Country, but surviving elsewhere in the South; d) plain rough music, unaccompanied by riding, although very often accompanied by the burning of the victims in effigy, found almost everywhere, and commonly in the Midlands and the South.³⁶

Although there are comparisons to be drawn between all four kinds of rough music and some of the Whiteboy practices, we are most interested here in *ceffyl pren*, especially as it relates intimately to the particular character of the Welsh agrarian Rebecca Riots.

Apart from its more light-hearted occurrence in weddings, a community resorted to *ceffyl pren* when one of its cherished values was at stake, such as the preservation of patriarchy in gender and marital roles or the safety of family members from the violence of a mother or a father. Usually the offending person was forcibly removed from his or her home during the night, hoisted up atop a wooden pole or tied into the saddle on an old mare, and paraded through the streets as a laughingstock. In some cases, an effigy of the offender was substituted. This "parade" was accompanied by the banging of tin pans, hooting and hollering, and the throwing of

35 E. P. Thompson, "Rough Music Reconsidered" in *Folklore* vol. 103 (1992), 3.

36 Thompson, 4.

stones and rotten fruit at the person or effigy. Sometimes a set of demeaning verses was howled out:

Ran-dan-dan!
 Betty Morris has beat her man.
 What was it with?
 Twas not with a rake, nor yet with a reel,
 But twas with a poker, that made him feel.³⁷

The practice of *ceffyl pren* (and rough music in general) tied the life of the individual into the life of the community and emphasized the inter-relatedness of all of its members. This involvement in the realm of the private and domestic continued with the use of *ceffyl pren* during the Rebecca Riots, when children were delivered to the doors of their supposed fathers and marital infidelities were noted and punished; however, the sphere of activity also broadened to include more "public" offenders: informers during the agrarian uprisings, prosecutors and unpopular officials.³⁸ An observer of this development noted with some alarm:

The right which is thus arrogated of judging . . . another man's domestic conduct, is certainly characteristic of a rude state of society; [but] when the same measures are applied to . . . thwarting the operation of the laws of the land, they become of much more serious import. The principle is perfectly Irish, and . . . contains the germ of resistance to legal orders.³⁹

Written in 1839 when Whiteboy activity was in decline, one wonders if this report may be highlighting, in a very general way, a perceived "intrusiveness" on the part of the Irish themselves.

As we have seen, one of the principle features of rough music was its involvement in private affairs. Although Whiteboyism was essentially a vehicle for responding to transgressions of a public nature, there were instances in which this mechanism also turned itself to the righting of private wrongs. Rev. James Delaney told C. G. Lewis in an 1830 interview that in addition to the usual sources of discontent, the Whiteboys of his parish concerned themselves with private affairs: "They were matters

37 Owen, 168.

38 Thompson, 17.

39 Quoted in Thompson, 17.

rather of a personal or domestic nature about which they latterly interfered . . . They were mostly personal or family disputes."⁴⁰ There were a few cases in which Whiteboys punished those individuals who had violated the social norms governing marriage. A man who had stolen another man's daughter and married her was visited some years after the wedding and beaten until he agreed to give a suitable marriage portion.⁴¹ In 1762 the Whiteboys again made their feelings known about marriages between people of very different social class:

An esquire at Cappoquin, when a bachelor, agreed with a peasant for the use of his daughter, for which he passed the peasant his bond for 100 pounds; but on the esquire's entering the matrimonial state, he was required to take up his bond. They wrote to the peasant to refund the money, upon pain of having his tongue drawn through his under-jaw, and fastened with a skewer.⁴²

In addition, the nocturnal mustering and the great racket and clamor of rough music also had their correspondences in some features of Whiteboyism. In rough music, "The noise formed part of a ritualized expression of hostility."⁴³ One account of an early agrarian uprising states:

Bodies of Levellers, collected by the blowing of horns, mobilized in great numbers and fired guns as they marched along in their white shirts, demolishing in the night time the fences of the enclosures of many persons and swearing fidelity to each other and secrecy.⁴⁴

In the same year a party of 400 Whiteboys assembled near Youghal, where they:

. . . built a bonfire, frequently discharged their guns, 'huzza'd,' and sent several audacious letters to the inhabitants of the town, threatening to pull down several houses, particularly a handsome house at a small distance, which they said was built upon the waste.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Lewis, 110.

⁴¹ Lewis, 120.

⁴² Lewis, 6.

⁴³ Thompson, 3.

⁴⁴ Donnelly, *IHS*, 22.

⁴⁵ Donnelly, *IHS*, 23.

It must be noted that these displays of bravado were calculated to inspire fear and were used very deliberately in contrast to the employment of stealth, which characterized many of their acts of destruction.

Rough music was, without exception, dramatic; in E. P. Thompson's words, it was "a kind of street theatre."⁴⁶ Costumes and transvestitism, marching in ragged lines in a kind of counterfeit "procession," effecting the symbolic condemnation and death of a transgressor through a mock trial and execution were burlesque features of rough music that are likewise discernible in reports of Whiteboyism. In many of these features we may perceive an ambivalence towards authority and a surreal, carnival atmosphere that were the result of a simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the state's laws and institutions. The wearing of costumes could signify either the orderly appearance of a unified body, as did the white shirts worn by the earliest Whiteboys, or a deliberate inversion of reality, as in the case of the female apparel that was also part of the standard uniform throughout the period of the disturbances.⁴⁷

Mock trials and the execution of proxies demonstrated a desire both to emulate the mechanism of justice and to subvert it. In the administration of Whiteboy justice, animals frequently stood in for their owners as the focus of communal frustration:

At this curious gathering a bay gelding, as if a substitute for its hated owner, was tried, found guilty, tortured and shot; the horse belonged to the zealous magistrate James Grove of Ballyhimock near Fermoy and had been seized from one of Grove's servants, who was waylaid while conducting a Leveller to gaol.⁴⁸

Similarly, in rough music the mock trial, execution and funeral were also resorted to in extreme cases. E. P. Thompson remarks:

The symbolism of public execution irradiated popular culture in the 18th century and contributed much to the vocabulary of rough music . . . To burn, bury or read the funeral service over someone still living was a terrible community judgment, in which the victim was made into

⁴⁶ Thompson, 6.

⁴⁷ Beames, 98.

⁴⁸ Donnelly, *IHS*, 24.

an outcast, one considered to be already dead. It was the ultimate in excommunication.⁴⁹

The Whiteboys skillfully exploited the vocabulary of death in order to terrify their victims into submission. Often written in a style that mimics 'official' legal letters, their notices frequently warned that death would be the result of an infringement of their code of laws. Many of them featured line drawings of a coffin which were intended to reinforce the seriousness of the threat:

Remarke the consequence Thomas Wardren dant pay the tithe far if
you do you may prepare your coffin you may be assured that you will
loose your life either at hame or abraad. Captain Rock.⁵⁰

Sometimes the coffin was only mentioned, as in this example which ties together the Whiteboy preoccupation with land and the penalty they promised for abuses:

That every man that took land this ten years That is not willing to
give it up in a few days, or any Laborer or Tradesman That will work
for him will Be visited By the whitefeet party and Burned to ashes And
the Lenth and Breath of his Coffin will be sufficient Land for them.⁵¹

The gallows erected at a crossroads, the grave dug in a public road, the coffin and the funeral bier played a part in the theatrical aspect of Whiteboyism and its consistent use of intimidation and "psychic terrorism"⁵² to enforce its strictures.

It cannot be asserted that Whiteboyism derives its particular features from rough music, nor, lacking sufficient proof, can we state that there once existed an exact Irish equivalent to the Welsh *ceffyl pren*. Moreover, there are some important differences between the two phenomena which must not be overlooked. Contrary to the ever-present element of community censure in rough music, Whiteboy assaults were sometimes carried out by members from towns nine or ten miles distant in order to preserve anonymity and decrease the risk of being identified.⁵³ Also,

49 Thompson, 7.

50 Lewis, 221.

51 Beames, 77.

52 Thompson, 20.

53 Lewis, 223-4.

Thompson's belief that rough music can be seen as channeling and controlling a community's frustrations and hostilities⁵⁴ is not reflected in the Whiteboy penchant for teaching lasting lessons through violence, often of a virulent and hateful nature. However, the similarities between the practice of the *ceffyl pren* during and outside of the Rebecca Riots and the actions of the Whiteboys, as well as the fact that the rural Irish lived in small communities much like the Welsh and English in which transgressions against accepted norms would quickly come to light, leads me to believe that some communal form of shaming and punishment also existed in Ireland.

Cultural and Folk Elements in the Whiteboys

Historians writing about the Whiteboys have searched for cultural precedents to explain the particular qualities of the Whiteboy rebellions, and in faction-fighting they partially found what they were looking for. In G. C. Lewis's words and the words of his informant, factions were:

. . . local parties among the peasantry, in a large part of Ireland, but especially in Munster and Connaught . . . Have not factions, in some places (Mr. Justice Day is asked) contributed to the disturbances? — Yes (he says), in some places; in the dark and more uncivilized parts of the country. It is a remnant of the old barbarous system of clanship, which still continues in practice.⁵⁵

These loosely-organized parties met at fairs and public meetings, and sorted out their long-standing differences with their fists. Occasionally lives were lost, an eventuality that would only increase the bitterness between the two groups and perpetuate the feud. Factions existed, it appears, for the sole purpose of hating other factions and fighting with them. While it has been asserted that faction-feuds may have contributed to Whiteboy organization by teaching the essentials of mustering large numbers and instilling them with a pugnacious spirit, faction-fighting "fulfilled a rather different function in peasant life from that of the Whiteboy societies, allowing a ritual and perhaps cathartic release of tensions."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Thompson, 8.

⁵⁵ Lewis, 279.

⁵⁶ Beames, 71.

These same tensions swelled in time with the rhythms of the agricultural cycle, and historian Michael Beames has claimed that outbreaks of Whiteboyism ebbed and flowed according to the stresses and slack-times of this cycle:⁵⁷

The seasonal festivals . . . [which] marked the end of these periods of strain—at the beginning of May and November—were not merely celebrations of work completed and a new season begun, but also the occasion for the release of emotional stresses.⁵⁸

According to Beames, April was the cruelest month, with the greatest concentration of Whiteboy activity reported, because it occurred during the build-up to May Eve, or Bealtaine in the old calendar. Like Samhain, on November Eve, this festival was traditionally regarded as a time during which the human world and the realm of the fairy Otherworld were opened to each other; and thus, it was a time for caution. Beames suggests that the Whiteboys were most active on May Eve, November Eve and New Year's Eve: three nights in the year traditionally associated with danger from fairies and the Otherworld.⁵⁹ How fascinating, then, to discover that a party of Whiteboys mustering in January 1762 referred to themselves as fairies!⁶⁰

The ritualized processions which marked the yearly cycle—especially the Wren Boys' procession—and the tradition of Irish folk drama were also contributors to the gallery of Whiteboy eccentricities, especially in the realm of costume.⁶¹ Three main items of costume can be distinguished: the straw hat, the white shirt and the wearing of women's apparel.⁶² Correspondences for all three of these varieties can be located in folk drama and procession, in which the characters of the fool and the

57 Beames, 72.

58 E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (Routledge, London & New York, 1989), 140–1.

59 Beames, 73.

60 Donnelly, *IHS*, 23.

61 Beames, 98–101. These uniforms "derived directly from peasant custom and ceremony. They appeared during the rituals associated with November and May Eve, with the Wren Hunt as well as with weddings and wakes. They occurred also in folk drama"

99.

62 Beames, 98.

female played central roles.⁶³ The Wren Boys' ceremonies were sometimes conducted by men dressed as women,⁶⁴ and folk drama features characters dressed in white shirts, women's clothing and straw.⁶⁵ In nineteenth-century County Cork a procession very like the *Mari Lwyd* of south-west Wales featured a boy clad in a white shirt who carried a horse's head.⁶⁶

Many suggestions have been put forth as to the significance of the ubiquitous white shirts sported by the Whiteboys. James Donnelly suggests that at the very least the white shirts "made friend stand out from foe in the dark," and also that the color white may have been interpreted as having a "revolutionary meaning" by contemporary, nervous observers.⁶⁷ To these ideas may be added a new one: white, or *bán* in Irish, has the customary meanings "white, fair, bright, pure, holy, blessed." With regard to land it can mean "untilled, waste, unoccupied."⁶⁸ Might we suggest that the Whiteboys or *Na Buachaillí Bána* took their name and distinctive costume from the very cause they were striving to champion: defending common, unoccupied land against enclosures and land-grabbers?

Transvestitism, another element of the Whiteboy costume, raises similar questions of cause and significance. A. W. Smith asks:

Why should a leader of popular protest take a feminine alias? Why, indeed, have so many rioters taken, literally, to female disguise? . . . Was it something deeper still . . . some sense that the real spiritual core of a community is to be found in its women and that their protest is the ultimate censure?⁶⁹

Again, at its simplest, the donning of women's apparel provided a useful disguise for men who were involved in illegal activities. But when examined in conjunction with the occasional tendency of certain Whiteboy groups (as well as those involved in the Rebecca Riots in Wales) to

63 Alan Gauley, *Irish Folk Drama* (The Mercier Press, Cork, 1969), 100.

64 Evans, 279.

65 Gauley, 80-90.

66 Evans, 277.

67 Donnelly, *IHS*, 29.

68 *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, RIA, 64.

69 Smith, 244-5.

adopt female aliases, such as Lady Rock, Lady Clare, Terry Alt's Mother, and Molly Maguire,⁷⁰ the occurrence of transvestitism acquires heightened importance. John Wesley reported that the Levellers in July 1762 "compelled everyone they met to take an oath to be true to Queen Sive . . . and the Whiteboys . . ." ⁷¹ There is no way of knowing for certain who this mythical woman might have been, but we might hazard a guess by the phonetic spelling of her name. Could she be Sadbh, a goddess associated with Fionn and the *fiana*? This would certainly neatly coincide with the perception of the Whiteboys as a group of quasi-outlaws. However, Darby Browne, a condemned Whiteboy, explained that:

By Sive we meant a distressed, harmless old woman, blind of one eye, who still lives at the foot of the mountain in the neighborhood; by her children, all those that would join us for the aforesaid purposes.⁷²

Her abode at the foot of the mountain and her one-eyedness connect her to a long tradition of *cailleach* or 'hags,' who appear in verse and legend in their role as immortal watchers and shapers of the landscape.

Of course, a careful reader of these accounts of agrarian uprising could not neglect to mention the representation of Ireland as a woman throughout Old Irish literature and into the *aisling* poems of the Early Modern Irish period. The Sovereignty Goddess, as she is now referred to by scholars of myth, was sometimes depicted as a disheveled old hag until her ritual union with the proper king. After this union, she is transformed into a beautiful, radiant young woman. There is always the danger that we might read too much intent into the submerged symbols and "deeply felt traditions" of past eras. But in this instance, it should be emphasized that the Sovereignty Goddess in her ritual union with the proper king represents the *land*, which would make her, for the Whiteboys, the woman most worth fighting for.

I hope to have shown here that the expression of Whiteboy activity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries drew its particular flavor from the cultural "building blocks" closest to hand. These "build-

⁷⁰ Beames, 100.

⁷¹ Donnelly, *IHS*, 26.

⁷² Donnelly, *IHS*, 28.

ing blocks"—mainly derived from folklore and custom—encoded the message of rebellion both for the participants and their victims. The great majority of the Protestant land-owners and ministers of the established church who were targeted for perpetuating lopsided land tenure and tithing policies must have lacked the cultural know-how to successfully "decode" the Whiteboys. However, their message also reached insiders whose culture-specific knowledge allowed them to apprehend fully the choice of symbols employed in costume, rhetoric and method. Evidence attests that the Whiteboys involved themselves deeply in the life of the community, taking sides in its private and domestic difficulties. In this regard, their activities can indeed be compared with the Welsh *ceffyl pren*, which gave impetus to the Rebecca Riots of the 1830s and 40s. For the native Irish man or woman for whom these symbols and codes were a natural inheritance, Whiteboy activity in the private domain would have left a lasting and terrifying impression, but perhaps also a strengthening one. In spite of a government almost wholly unsympathetic to them, the Whiteboys represented a community that was striving to enforce its own legal codes and to determine its own cultural and moral ideals.

Kate Chadbourne
Harvard University